Chapter 24
Resilience and the Distance Higher Degree by Research Candidate

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ABSTRACT

In the context of higher education, resilience is often defined as being a reaction to adversity or hardship rather than a pre-emptive strategy to prevent or minimise attrition. Moreover, resilience is at times framed in relation to a student deficit, as opposed to an ecological construct for which many are responsible. While resilience is a necessary attribute of the successful Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidate, resilience is an issue and shared responsibility for students, educators, institutions and communities alike. This chapter proposes a model to assess and promote resilience strategies in higher education for the purposes of the retention and development of distance higher degree candidates.

INTRODUCTION

Student retention and attrition are key buzz-words in academia, for differing reasons—depending on each stakeholder's perspective. For the distance higher degree by research student, retention and attrition are as important as those in undergraduate studies. For institutions, Australian higher education is in an era when new government funding strategies are placing an emphasis on completion rather than enrolment (Gillard, 2009) and are thus making it a financial necessity for institutions to consider ways in which to foster retention. For communities, completions contribute to the economic and social good. For the academic supervisor, retention and completion of their higher degree

student brings kudos and is a reflection on their performance as academics. For the individual student, retention relates to the completion of their formal qualifications, and, it is hoped, an increase in their economic and social capital. For the authors of this chapter, resilience is a key to understanding student retention and attrition.

Resilience is often defined as being in reaction to adversity. We believe that rather than wait for reactions to adversity in the distance education context (e.g., course drop out) we need to encourage the promotion of resilience as a preventative, pre-emptive approach for student attrition and development. Six focal points of resilience will be examined in the context of the distance higher degree by research candidate. Of these focal points, this chapter will concentrate on one aspect of promoting resilience, namely connectedness, and within an ecological framework, will examine ways in which resilience can be promoted and enhanced for higher degree students. Recommendations for future research conclude this chapter.

THE DISTANCE EDUCATION HIGHER DEGREE BY RESEARCH (DE HDR) CANDIDATE

While there is considerable research around the supervision of higher degree students generally, there is comparatively less literature describing the experience of being a higher degree research student off campus or in distance mode. The number of higher degree by research (DE HDR) candidates studying in distance mode is not insignificant, with Malone arguing in 1998 that it was the fastest growing mode of study in Australia. In 2004, approximately 10 per cent of all Australian university students studied in distance mode (Subic & Maconachie, 2004) while in the United States at least two million higher education students were enrolled in distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2004). Previously known as correspondence study, distance education is defined as an educational pro-

cess in which a significant proportion of teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner (Perraton, 1988). It can be offered on its own or in conjunction with other forms of education and typically utilises mediums such as printed material, telephone and/or audio recordings, television and video recordings, online learning, the web and multimedia materials (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). The delivery mode for distance teaching and learning is an integral component of the model presented here.

For those living in rural and remote areas of Australia, postgraduate distance education is often the only means they have for improving their qualifications. The research questions and issues framed by those living in rural and remote areas of Australia are also likely to be distinctly different from those living in more populated areas of Australia, given the very different contexts in which these populations live and work. Thus, enhancing the research capacity of those living away from major metropolitan areas is not only important for rural and remote practitioners' own career prospects but also provides a means of research and evaluation in fields that might otherwise go unnoticed. International students studying in distance mode from their own country represent another significant group of higher degree students that need to be acknowledged, as too are students who might live close to tertiary institutions but because of work and/or family commitments elect to study in distance mode.

Students typically study in distance mode because of the flexibility such courses provide (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Tricker, Rangecroft, Long & Gilroy, 2001; Willems, 2005) and/or because of their preference to study alone (Gorsky, Caspi & Trumper, 2004). However, there are also negatives in undertaking postgraduate study in distance mode, with some suggesting that distance study does not have same teaching and learning capacity as on campus environments (Flaherty, Pearce & Rubin, 1998). Moreover, others have pointed out that the learning experience for distance students

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